

Pastoral Practice of Closed Communion

The purpose of this paper is to address a possible situation in a congregation concerning the practice of closed communion. The congregation under consideration presents the following communion statement.

“All baptized Christians who confess Jesus Christ as their Savior, examine themselves and repent of their sins, and believe that Christ is really present in Holy Communion are invited to receive the Lord’s Supper with us.”

The LCMS has traditionally taught two criteria for admission to the Lord’s Supper: “1) a genuine understanding of and faith in Christ’s presence in and through the sacramental elements and 2) doctrinal and personal unity among those who commune together.”¹ The person participating in the Lord’s Supper is communed as both an “*individual*” and as a “*confessor*.”² The communion statement above addresses the communicant as an individual who is worthy to receive the sacrament. It does not, however, address the communicant as a confessor of the corporate faith of that particular church body.

The primary concern for admission to the Lord’s Supper is that the communicant, *as an individual*, is worthy. A worthy communicant believes the Lord’s words that he is receiving Christ’s body and blood for the forgiveness of his sins. “This is my body, given for you. This is my blood, poured out for you, for the forgiveness of sins. Discerning the body of the Lord.” (Matt 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-25, Luke 22:19-20, 1 Cor 11:23-29) A worthy communicant is able “to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.” (1 Cor 11:28) This “examining” means that the communicant is truly sorry for his sins, he trusts Christ as his Savior, and he intends to amend his sinful life.³ The Lutheran Confessions concur. “That person is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: ‘Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.’”⁴ “Entire worthiness . . . consists solely and alone in the most holy obedience and complete merit of Christ, which we make our own through genuine faith.”⁵ “Those who are shameless and unruly must be told to stay away, for they are not fit to receive the forgiveness of sins since they do not desire it and do not want to be good.”⁶ The above communion statement certainly follows the Scriptural and Confessional intent of communing worthy individuals.

However, not only worthy individuals but also unity among communicants is required at the Lord’s Supper. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul rebukes the divisions among the members, particularly concerning the Lord’s Supper. “I hear that when you come together as a

church, there are divisions among you.” (1 Cor 11:18) Some Christians were eating and drinking extravagantly without regard for their brothers. Before communing, Christians should be reconciled to their brothers. (Matt 5:23-24) The Lord’s Supper was not only a communion or participation in the body and blood of Christ, but the Lord’s Supper actually united the Christians in one body. “Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.” (1 Cor 10:17) Of special importance was unity in doctrine. Those who communed together were united in the apostles’ teaching. (Acts 2:42) The Roman church was to “watch out for those who cause divisions . . . that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.” (Rom 16:17) Celebration of the Lord’s Supper was a unified confession of faith because “whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” (1 Cor 11:26)

A communicant, therefore, is not only communed as a worthy *individual*, but also as one who *confesses* the unity of faith and doctrine of the congregation. In his sermons on the Lord’s Supper, Luther preached, “If one partakes of the Lord’s Supper he, by that act, makes for himself, individually a public confession of his faith. Those of the same faith and the same hope unite at the Table of the Lord, while those of a different faith stand aloof.”⁷ Accordingly, the Lutheran Confessions do not allow “communion with the papists”,⁸ “fellowship” with the Sacramentarians,⁹ or taking part in the errors of “Other Factions and Sects Which Never Accepted the Augsburg Confession.”¹⁰ A person must not only be a *worthy individual*, but in order to maintain unity he must also *confess* the doctrine of the church body with which he communes. “Communion at a church’s altar implies acceptance of the doctrinal position of that church body.”¹¹ If a person believes the above communion statement, he may be worthy to commune, but if he belongs to another denomination, he still publicly confesses the doctrine of that other denomination. Such a practice either breaks the unity or states public approval to another denomination’s doctrine. “To permit a person of another church group to participate in the orthodox Lutheran Sacrament is to give tacit approval of that individual’s denominational affiliation, and thus condone that church body’s denial of articles of the Christian Faith.”¹² Hence the need for closed communion, the communion of not only worthy individuals but also those who share the same confession of faith.

The responsibility for closed communion is that of the pastor. The pastor is called by God to oversee the congregation. “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” (Acts 20:28) Christ has given pastors the office of the keys

(John 20:23) and has made them stewards of the mysteries of God. (1 Cor 4:1) Pastors are accountable directly to God. “They keep watch over you as men who must give an account.” (Heb 13:17) “Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you . . . It is the Lord who judges me.” (1 Cor 4:2-4) The Lutheran Confessions confirm that the pastor is accountable to teach, instruct, and examine those who would commune. “The custom has been retained among us of not administering the sacrament to those who have not previously been examined and absolved.”¹³ In the practice of closed communion, the pastor judges and maintains the doctrine of the church. “It is the office of the bishop to preach the Gospel, forgive sins, judge doctrine and condemn doctrine that is contrary to the Gospel.”¹⁴ In his ordination vows the pastor solemnly promises to perform the duties of his office in accordance with the Confessions and that all his teaching and administration of the sacraments will be in conformity with Holy Scripture and the Confessions.¹⁵ As part of fulfillment of this vow, “The pastor of the local congregation is responsible for deciding who is to receive communion and who may not receive communion at the congregation’s altar, by virtue of his office as a called and ordained servant of the Word.”¹⁶ For this reason the LCMS has made it official practice “that pastors and congregations of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, except in situations of emergency and in special cases of pastoral care, commune individuals of only those synods which are now in fellowship with us.”¹⁷ Therefore, the pastor who faithfully practices closed communion remains faithful to God’s Word, keeps his ordination vows, and follows the practice of our church body.

The practice of closed communion is not a novel idea but was also the practice of the early church. In his study of the early church Werner Elert states that “Before the Eucharist began, however, the ‘hearers’ had to leave the assembly, and not only they but also the catechumens, even though they were already being solidly instructed toward reception.”¹⁸ The catechetical instruction not only insured the faith and understanding of the individual but also the unity of faith of the church. Elert continues,

“The partakers become ‘one body and one spirit.’ Therefore there may be nothing separating or dividing them, for that which divides would do injury to the *koinonia* and so to the unity of the body of Christ. Such divisions are a constant danger even among the baptized. Even though a man must first be baptized before he may partake of the Holy Communion, this does not mean that all the baptized may without distinction partake of the Eucharist together. Divisions can be of various kinds. In the case of heresy it is a confessional division. The extending or refusing of Eucharistic fellowship is then always a confessional act of the whole congregation.”¹⁹

The early church was diligent in ensuring confessional unity. Travelers between churches provided letters or credentials for fellowship. The Synod of Antioch in 341 required that “no stranger is to be received without a Letter of Peace.”²⁰ The council of Carthage (345-48) required that no one could commune in another congregation “without a letter from his bishop.”²¹ The person “comes under the care of the bishop of the new congregation” and “he cannot then at will commune elsewhere.”²²

A pastor who enters a congregation with the above communion statement would do well to proceed slowly but deliberately. He may begin by inquiring of his elders the past practice of the former pastor and congregation. After he listens and uncovers the past practice and the reasons for that practice, he may then continue with instruction based on the above statements of the Scriptures, the Confessions, the pastor’s accountability to God and his vows, and early church practice. Heavy handed “because I said so” would only antagonize the congregation. He may remind the elders of the thorough catechetical instruction of youth and adult confirmands which precedes their communion and not only includes instruction of the Sacrament but all the main doctrines of the Lutheran faith. The goal of this instruction is not only individual examination, discernment, and faith in the Sacrament and its benefits but also a united confession of faith. Communing those of other denominations or synods not in our fellowship would undermine this catechetical instruction and downplay the importance of correct doctrine.

After gaining support of the elders through instruction, the pastor may then address the voters with an explanation of closed communion and its necessity. This is not an issue to be voted on. As their called pastor, he must administer the Sacrament in accordance with the Scriptures and Confessions. Without too lengthy an explanation he must convey the understanding that only those who are members in good standing of the LCMS may commune. In this way the pastor publicly announces “the rule.” Any exceptions will be addressed by the pastor working in conjunction with the elders. Exceptions are sure to arise, but they should be handled on a case by case basis rather than confusing “the rule.” Individuals may dislike the pastor’s firm stance, but they would be even more upset if he was inconsistent in his practice (i.e. communing his own Presbyterian mother-in-law but not communing a son of the church who is now ELCA). The pastor would do well to inform his congregation that he is bound to make mistakes, but his goal is still closed communion.

After an explanation to the voters, the pastor may proceed with a new communion statement. Paul McCain offers a choice of several statements which politely convey the policy

of closed communion to guests.²³ If one of the chosen statements directs the guests to the pastor, the pastor should ensure that he is available before the service. The pastor may also make a brief announcement concerning closed communion before the service or before communion.

Depending on the resistance or uncertainty of members of the congregation, the pastor may want to teach a short Bible study series on closed communion in order to enlighten and answer questions regarding this practice. Here again, McCain offers a three-lesson overview for just such an occasion.²⁴

In practicing closed communion the pastor must maintain a firm hand, but he must also be sensitive to visitors. Denial to the Lord's Table should not be discussed in a legalistic, condemning way but as an invitation for the visitor to learn more about the beliefs of the Lutheran Church and her high regard for the Sacrament and its benefits. The unity of faith achieved in closed communion is not a negative but a great blessing for the church. To both the members of the congregation and to visitors the pastor should convey the message that "our love for the Sacrament, and our love for the individual, are the motivations for our practice of closed communion."²⁵

¹ *Admission to the Lord's Supper, Basics of Biblical and Confessional Teaching*, CTCR November 1999, LCMS 2000, p 6.

² *Ibid*, p 31.

³ *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation*, CPH, St. Louis, 1986, p 239.

⁴ *Ibid*, p 29.

⁵ *The Book of Concord*, T.G. Tappert, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1959, FC Ep VII, 20, p 484.

⁶ *Ibid*, LC V, 58, p 453.

⁷ Paul T. McCain, *Communion Fellowship*, The Luther Academy, Northville, SD 2004, p 23.

⁸ *The Book of Concord*, FC SD, Rule and Norm, 7, p 505.

⁹ *Ibid*, FC SD VII, 33, p 575.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, FC SD XII, 8, p 633.

¹¹ McCain, p 4.

¹² *Ibid*, p 4.

¹³ *The Book of Concord*, AC XXV, 1 p 61.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, AC XXVIII, 21, p 84.

¹⁵ *Lutheran Worship Agenda*, CPH, St. Louis, MO 1984, p 212.

¹⁶ McCain, p 11.

¹⁷ *Theology and Practice of The Lord's Supper*, CTCR May 1983, p 22, 1967 Res. 2-19.

¹⁸ Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, translated by N.E. Nagel, CPH, St. Louis, 1966, p 75.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p 80.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p 131.

²¹ *Ibid*, p 132.

²² *Ibid*, p 133.

²³ McCain, p 10.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p 8-9.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p 12.